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## Some Aspects of the Mental Hygiene of the Child

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THE physical hygiene of the child has been studied and applied with much success by mothers and nurses for the last two or three decades. What modern mother would think of bringing up her child without Holt, Kerley or Griffiths at her right hand and a scale and sterilizer at her left. "Of making of books there is no end," and the number about the care of the body of the child make of the Biblical Jew who said it not only a sage but a prophet.

After the child has from birth been weighed and measured, accurately and regularly, fed on a scientifically prepared diet, bathed, exercised and given an open air sleeping porch, there often is vast disappointment that its behavior is not the fine flowering of so much conscientious effort.

If care and attention to the child's bodily needs were all that were necessary, then wealthy and intelligent parents should bring forth perfect children. Airy nurseries, big gardens, visits to the country or seaside, trained baby nurses, governesses and specialists, every advantage that money can buy, do not always achieve success. The child is not happy; its sleep is restless; it is irritable and moody; it has a bad disposition; it does not "behave," ad infinitum.

The problem of physical care has been practically worked out for the average normal child. The rapid growth in variety and extent of function, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that accompanies the rapid growth of the body is often lost sight of in the intense interest in the purely physical aspect of the child's development.

### THE NEWER INTEREST IN BEHAVIOR

Interest today is beginning to be directed toward the child's behavior and the strength of that interest is manifested by the growing number of men and women who are reading and studying human behavior or psychology. From this viewpoint the child must be looked upon as a dynamic engine whose behavior can theoretically be divided into two fields, that of its interaction with its environment and that of its interaction within itself. The interaction with the environment makes up the larger part of the study of psychology; the interaction within itself is the field of hygiene and physiology and, as has been noted, is fairly well covered.

Naturally, these fields are not separate and the division made is purely for practical purposes. In reality every internal interaction has its influence on and takes part in an environmental interaction. The child's organism is so sensitive that fatigue and irritability are produced by causes which to us may appear extraordinarily trivial. The happy hours of childhood are often a myth. To our relatively crude adult minds the child's life is made up of bathing, dressing, walking, eating, playing and sleeping. It is not in these activities that the source of the child's unhappiness is usually to be found. It lies in the behavior of the parents or nurse, their relationship to the child, their actions and words. It is the tone of their voices, the very thoughts that pass through their minds and which show themselves so plainly to the sensitive mind of the child, that bring about its bad behavior.

Compare the behavior, happy or otherwise, of the child with adults, to that of the child at work making mud pies, block houses, a dam in a gutter. Here you can observe persistence, patience, application, complete abandon, utter lack of consciousness of self or anything but the matter in hand. Creative intelligence is at work here with new things being born into the world, and new functions and qualities being built up in the child.

#### RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS

It has been possible to curb in a child of three and one-half years of age, insomnia, night terrors, irritability, recurrent attacks of nausea, vomiting and prostration by simply changing a ruthless disciplinarian for a motherly nurse. In another case, an eight year old girl ceased having insomnia and intestinal upsets when her parents were asked to transfer the acrimonious and bitter discussions of their differences to the privacy of their bed chamber and appear as well bred in the presence of their daughter as they would before friends. Conflicts between parents and between parent and child are always disastrous and harmful to the child whatever the outcome, be it victory or defeat. Victory in the conflict with authority gives the child an undue sense of power; defeat, an undue sense of helplessness. Both the exaggerated power and helplessness are memories which will impede the child's activities in later life.

Modern psychology, while it makes understandable much in the behavior of children that was formerly unknown, places a greater responsibility upon the child's parents and teachers and offers a greater opportunity for conscious and intelligent direction of its education. Given a healthy body, the conduct of a child is largely the

result of the success or failure of its parents or nurses as social individuals. Given a healthy child, crying and whining, bad tempers, moodiness at meals, undue shyness, timidity or fear, may all be reactions of the child in response to the behavior of its human environment. In this situation lie the seeds from which nervous disorders of the future may very well spring forth. The mental hygiene of the child is inextricably bound up with the mental hygiene of the adult, for children will always have to be brought up by adults. Dr. C. Mac Fie Campbell, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School, rightly says, "To understand the child the influences of the home must be studied."<sup>1</sup>

In all of this, one must not underestimate the physical factors but seek at all times to rule them out as the cause for malbehavior. It is unnecessary to emphasize this. More often a physical factor is sought for too long. Failure to examine a child for the presence of physical defects or disease is inexcusable. In time it will be just as inexcusable to neglect the psychological factors.

#### HEREDITARY DISPOSITION OF THE CHILD

Furthermore, the hereditary disposition of the child must be taken into account. Children vary tremendously in their temperament. From the moment of birth observant mothers note well marked variations in conduct and behavior in their children. One child is mild, calm, easily pleased; another, restless, irritable, demanding that his environment be "just so." Babies have unconsciously a standard of comparison that makes this world a difficult place for them whatever their ner-

<sup>1</sup>"A City School District and Its Subnormal Children"—*Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 2, p. 237.

vous organization. The life within the womb can be accurately described as perfect. It is thought by some that the organic memories of this period are the stuff from which all our ideas of Paradise and Heaven are made.

At birth, loud sounds and bright lights, new skin sensations of touch and pressure, cold and heat, dryness and moisture, pleasure and pain, together with the internal sensation of hunger for air and food, form a continuous stream of stimuli. Babies of "nervous inheritance" react to these quite differently from those of relatively dull nervous organization. Professor John B. Watson's experiments, which show that sudden loud noises, jars and marked and sudden changes in position are fear-producing stimuli, suggest the advisability of protecting children who have inherited nervous dispositions from such stimuli, at least for their first eighteen months. These experiments of Professor Watson's<sup>2</sup> on infants from birth to over two hundred days of age, indicate to what extent revision of our old conception of the emotional life of the child has now become necessary. For example, purring black cats, pigeons rattling about in a paper bag, rabbits and guinea pigs crawling over and held before the baby as experiments, all failed to produce the element of fear. They aroused interest or caused but slight attention. The same result, viz., lack of fear, was noted when babies were placed in a dark room, and a faint light turned on, presenting black cats, pigeons and rabbits in active relationship to the babies. The sight of camels, Shetland ponies, zebras, bears, parrots, monkeys, ostriches, some coming within two or three inches of the babies, also produced no fear.

<sup>2</sup> *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* by Dr. John B. Watson, published by Lippincott Co.

That children often are fearful of animals is beyond question, but Dr. Watson believes that the fear in such instances is usually traceable to fear-provoking actions on the part of the animal. We must, therefore, revise our ideas of the "naturalness" of animals as fear-producing stimuli. Again, fear may be associated with the dark or fire, the fear-producing stimuli having first been experienced in the dark or near the fire.

That it is a particular kind of action that produces fear is often illustrated from the observations of parents. In one instance, a mother discovered that her boy, after he had been within twenty-five feet of a passing excursion steamer from which emanated a sudden shriek, thereafter manifested fear whenever the fire engines passed his home, although prior to that time he had shown no fear with the passing of engines.

The task of mothers is by no means equal. Some children seem to be of such elastic fibre that quite serious faults in training sometimes result in little permanent damage. Others, especially the high strung and sensitive types of children, require the most delicate of handling and if faulty methods are employed, the damage at times seems almost irreparable.

When we know that the child has inherited a peculiarly nervous disposition, wisdom in its management is as essential as air. The nervous, high strung temperaments are often beings of great potential powers. It is your wayward, intractable, over-responsive child who often has the greatest potentialities for achievement. By keeping this hereditary factor in mind we avoid the unthinking criticism that is so often applied to mothers when their children misbehave. "Now if I were bringing up that child," says the proud parent of a placid offspring, "she wouldn't be so nervous." Just

because the child is more sensitive, more responsive than the average, the task of teaching it to adapt itself to the world, to be at home on the earth in a way that shall be satisfactory to it and its environment, means an expenditure of time and genuine understanding of the problem.

#### DISCIPLINE AND EDUCATION AS BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Two of the most difficult of the behavior problems in the care of children are those of discipline and education. What are discipline and education? Are they blind obedience and slavish imitation? Does our education and discipline of children tend toward the development of their powers or does it tend in the direction of our own ease and comfort? If the former, we must assist the child by allowing it free play for its attempts to experience, *i.e.*, to know and to use its environment. To state in words the principles and objects of education and discipline, is simple. To apply them, is a task that is engaging the attention of conscience-stricken parents and educators.

There is not a month in the year that the educational system in vogue, both at home, at school and at large, is not either proclaimed or confessed a failure. The rapidly growing number of experimental schools, the eager attention and interest received by every new idea or system, all proclaim the growing unrest at the inadequacy of our educational institutions. Dallas Lore Sharp in the *Atlantic Monthly* for July, 1921, voices the bitter cry of the parent and educator at the failure of our education:

Books make a full man; it is life and nature that give him authority. But life and nature are little reckoned with in formal education. . . . Human nature is unique and not to be handled by machine. *It is active, a doing nature*<sup>3</sup> fit for unfinished

earth, not heaven, the earth partner and co-creator in God's slowly shaping world. . . . Education is too far removed from the simple, the original, from life, and nature. . . . A poet is stillborn in Boston every day—killed by toys in place of the tools that make them, by books in place of the life they tell of, by schools, museums, theatres and stores where things are pieced and ordered, filmed, collected, canned and labelled in place of a whole world of whole things. . . . The educating process is started wrong and started too early. It should start with work. . . . Every son of God needs, if not a world to create, an earth to subdue. . . . Instead of allowing him to work we teach him to be amused. . . . Nature should be the teacher of us all.

Is not this in reality a protest against education by ideas and a plea for an education by action? The change is coming rapidly. Is there any university worthy of the name that would teach chemistry, engineering, physics, physiology from books? Are they not taught by action in the laboratory with books as tools of lesser importance. Is not that but an extension of the method by which modern educators are teaching the child?

The fundamental fact in such experimental educational systems as Montessori's and Marietta Johnson's is that the child is educated by doing and not by ideas. The first movements of a child are carried out in response to external stimuli of light rays or sound waves or as the result of contact with external objects, or they are restless movements due to inner discomfort such as hunger. At first there is no knowledge of distance and its reach is but poorly adjusted to that for which it reaches. Gradually it learns to become skillful and once it reaches a point of precision, one can well imagine that life becomes for it a daily discovery of innumerable new objects and functions, all having innumerable new

<sup>3</sup> Italics my own.

graduations and compounds of the sensations of weight and touch, of heat and cold, of distance and color, of comfort and discomfort, of pain and pleasure, felt not only by the skin of its hands, but also by lips and tongue, by eyes and ears. The child is not content with touching and manipulating; it must also taste and once it begins to walk, its universe spreads out increasingly before it, and it grabs and touches, it pulls and throws everything within reach in order to get the joy of experiencing the world in which it lives.

Its body interacting upon environment compels the child with irresistible force to action and it is foolish, nay more, it is dangerous to attempt to stop that interaction or repress it. No doubt such a condition makes for a trying time on the part of its elders. The only wise course is to recognize it as a time of many trials and help the child by giving it freedom of motion in an environment in which dangerous or destructive agencies are out of reach—out of reach solely because the child is not capable of handling them. One should make the criterion of the things a child can play with, not the power of objects to inflict pain or damage upon it, but rather the common sense limits imposed by the child's ability to handle objects skillfully and in accordance with their uses.

The skill and delicacy of children who have not been impeded by unwise repression in their handling of themselves and the objects around them, is extraordinary. They will pick out an object, manipulate it and replace it deliberately and carefully. Madame Montessori and those who have used her methods in the education of very young children, bring enthusiastic and convincing evidence of the ability of children from two years of age onward skillfully and accurately to perform

many actions formerly thought to be beyond their powers. If this method is followed, the child, before it is two years old, should become perfectly capable of conducting itself correctly and with perfect freedom in an ordinary environment. It is only by knowing the properties of one's environment that one can learn to react properly to it. The possession of such a fund of useful reactions to one's environment can be called good discipline or, equally well, self-control.

If the parents or nurse are of strong character so that the child is dominated from the moment of its birth, it may learn to obey but the price will be its independence of spirit. Either a colorless, neutral individual results or there is a grave possibility that a neurosis will make up a part of the personality.

Ruthless and severe punishments for disobedience in the earlier years are a most prolific source of lying in the child. I have seen a number of such cases in which the despotic authority of the parent was exercised from birth and the result was not happy in any respect. A more common occurrence is the remorseless exercise of authority at odd moments. How often does a child disobey and, as it is said, "get away with it" only to find on a third or thirty-third time that, due to chance mishap in mother's life or father's business, he is ruthlessly and severely punished. Can one imagine anything more confusing to a child's mind than such capricious behavior on the part of his parents or nurses, or to what extent such punishments may rankle and sting with their residue of a sense of injustice. And if perchance the child learns that he has a weapon by which he can successfully counter attack and make authority yield to him, from that day his future is black indeed. He then becomes the ruler of the house-

hold; his slightest whim has to be obeyed and his likes and dislikes catered to on penalty of an outburst. So we see that the tight grasp of overpowering authority leads to the effort to break away, and failing, must produce weaklings and failures. This realization no doubt, is a bitter pill to old-fashioned parents. In fact, few who ought to swallow it,—will!

True discipline, that is, ability to act properly in a situation, is not acquired by an outside force acting as a rubber stamp. Genuine discipline is an organic function that grows out of interest and out of actions performed in building up interests and habits. Every interest in its development yields discipline; without interest there is no true learning. There may be word formulas, there too often are, but these are actively and purposely forgotten as soon as they have served their purpose, as in the case of passing an examination or averting the displeasure of parent or nurse.

Ruthless discipline as a method of inculcating ideals has been carried out by savage tribes as well as by imperial Germany. The result in the lower savages has been vividly described by the late Dr. C. A. Mercier,<sup>4</sup> the great English psychiatrist. Their lives, he says, "are lived in fear, in restraint, in submission, in suffering, subject to galling, unreasoning, unnecessary, arbitrary prohibitions and taboos and to customary duties equally galling, unreasoning, unnecessary and arbitrary." How often do we hear our elders proclaim in tones of reverent praise the discipline that must necessarily have forced them to lead their lives—"in fear, in restraint, in submission, etc."

On the other hand, extreme tenderness is equally bad. The indulgent and protective parent becomes the uncon-

scious ideal of the kind of environment the individual henceforth seeks. Dr. Walter F. Dearborn,<sup>5</sup> Professor of Education at Harvard University, says: "Too often the parent stands between the child and the realities of life. The child is shielded from life and protected from the consequences of his act. His life has become 'shut in' because the doors to the world of realities have been closed by too fond and protecting parents."

Gentleness is not taught a child by beating him. His voice does not become well modulated by shouting at him. All those qualities we would have him possess cannot be given him unless we ourselves possess them. "To train the child, the parent has to train himself or herself; true education must involve the parent much as we dislike to think that our education is not completed," says Dr. C. Mac Fie Campbell.<sup>6</sup>

That there is a new era at hand in which the customs and traditions of child raising will be subject to scientific examination is undisputed. As an integral part of such a program, the mental hygiene of the child will be the unescapable responsibility of its parents or guardians. The child today is too frequently brought up in a haphazard, unconscious way. The results achieved in the past were obtained in a blind, instinctive manner. A proper understanding, however, will know that all forms of behavior develop from the endeavor of the organism to get into relation with the environment; it will know that behavior is always some driving force of nature finding its way into, through and out of us, striving as it were to get its effect.

<sup>5</sup> "Facts of Mental Hygiene for Teachers"—*Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 3, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> "Nervous Children and Their Training"—Dr. C. Mac Fie Campbell—*Mental Hygiene*—Vol. 3, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *The Principles of Rational Education*, by Dr. C. A. Mercier.